



FAMILY HISTORY PUBLIC HEALTH INITIATIVE

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

People who have close relatives with common diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, are more likely to develop those diseases themselves. Although clinicians are trained to collect family histories, they often fail to do so because of a lack of time, reimbursement, and skills in interpreting the information. According to results from the *Healthstyles 2004* survey, 96% of Americans believe that knowing a family history is important to their health, yet only 33% of Americans have ever tried to gather and organize their families' health history. As a risk factor that reflects inherited genetic susceptibility as well as shared environment and behaviors, family history has untapped potential as a low-cost, "low-tech" genomic tool for public health and preventive medicine.

WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

The CDC Office of Genomics and Disease Prevention, in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health (NIH), academia, and health professional organizations, began an initiative in 2002 to develop and evaluate the use of family history for risk assessment and disease prevention. In FY 2005, major activities have included the following:

- Completed development of a Web-based tool, *Family Healthware*[™], that collects information about health behaviors, screening tests, and a person's family history for six diseases—coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and colorectal, breast, and ovarian cancer. Three research centers are currently conducting a clinical trial of the family history tool to determine whether family history risk assessment and personal prevention messages influence health behaviors and use of medical services.
- Collaborated with the U.S. Surgeon General and other HHS agencies on the Surgeon General's Family History Initiative, which is a national campaign that marked Thanksgiving as National Family History Day. This initiative also included the development of a Web-based tool called "*My Family Health Portrait*," which is a simplified version of CDC's *Family Healthware*[™] tool. It is designed to organize family health information into a printout that people can take to health-care professionals to help determine whether they are at a higher risk for certain diseases. In FY 05 the tool was downloaded more than 360,000 times, and a print-based version also available was distributed to more than 85,000 people nationwide. CDC also distributed packets of family history resource materials to chronic disease and genetic experts in the health departments of every U.S. state and territory. These materials were designed to assist local health departments in their efforts to educate people about the importance of collecting a family health history.
- Promoted the importance of knowing family history to the public and provided educational materials to health professionals via a Web site that includes fact sheets, presentations, case studies, news articles, relevant links, and other resources.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Validating the new self-administered family history tool will support the use of family history as a screening tool for disease prevention and health promotion. Several federal and professional initiatives are converging to work synergistically on public health awareness campaigns and health-care provider education. Further research and development will focus on all the life stages—from children to older adults—where family history assessment has the potential to prevent disease.